

CHAPTER V

THE LEGEND

Lone squaw was left at settler's door,
Six days she lived, and breathed no more.
Was it from wound, or grief she bore?
They laid her there far from tepees,
On bluff high above the trees.
They died for us, those poor Pawnees.

As the summer of 1873 progressed, 350 Pawnee Indians prepared to leave the reservation at Genoa, Nebraska, on their annual buffalo hunt up the Republican Valley.²²⁵ John Williamson had just been newly appointed trail agent and would ride with them. At 23 years of age, this was a new experience for him. Having arrived in the state two years earlier, he had recently moved to the Pawnee Agency where he was employed as an agency farmer. "I did not apply for the place and was surprised when one of the chiefs came . . . and informed me that they had decided to request the government to appoint me to accompany them.²²⁶ L.B.Platt, of Baltimore, was also to join them. It would be an adventure neither of them would forget.

They left the reservation on July 3rd, and during the month that followed, hunted along the Beaver Creek. At some point, they established a camp a half mile from B.F.Bradbury's home and trading post, where they stayed for three days. Years later, Bradbury's daughter, Lola, recalled their first visit to his store.

As mother appeared at the door she was saluted with "Where is your Indian?" Mother understood that he had reference to father so she replied, "A short distance from the house Do you want to see him?" Their conversation ran as follows: "No, I want some bread." "Do you want to buy it." "Yes." Mother went into the house and returned with a loaf of bread which she told him he could have for 10 cents. Said he, "Give it to me." to which she replied, "No, I won't. You told me you wanted to buy it and that is all the way you can get it." "Give it to me," he repeated with emphasis. She left him and went into the house. ²²⁷

With this he left, but returned shortly after with a number of others. By this time though, Bradbury was there to greet them himself. "They came into the house, looked around, and then took a general survey around the house. That which seemed to attract their attention more than anything else was a new grindstone." It was not long before "scores of Indians came to sharpen their knives for dressing buffalo," which Bradbury allowed until he saw that the crank shaft was about worn out and told them to leave. ²²⁸

He didn't have any more trouble with the Indians until the third day. One of the men he came to know as "Bluffer," because of dealings with the grindstone, brought a riding bridle in to trade for groceries. Bradbury offered him seventy five cents for it and he accepted, but the Indian wanted coffee, sugar, flour and ammunition among other things.

He wanted so many different things that each parcel, of course, would be small. Father commenced weighing out the different articles for him and each time he would see the scales balance he would say, "little more, little more." Brother sat watching the whole transaction with not a very amiable feeling toward the Indian. Finally he remarked, "If he can't be satisfied I would tell him to take his bridle and go. These words were hardly said when the Indian put his whip to brother's mouth as much as to say, "Keep your mouth shut." Charlie took hold of the whip, then the Indian dropped it, drew his bow and reached for an arrow. Then brother took hold of both his arms and held him. Father stepped up between them and said, "No more of this." The Indian replied, "All right, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go to camp and get my chief and a heap of Indians and come back" "All right," said father, "I would like to see your chief." When he saw he could not bluff father, he calmed down, accepted what had been weighed out for him, and seemed satisfied with the trade.²²⁹

As he left the store, he shook hands with everyone except Charlie, with whom he'd had the tussel, and turning the Mrs. Bradbury said, "I don't like your boy. I have been here heap days, heap talk. I don't like him."²³⁰

From here, the Indians traveled to the northwest and on August 4th, reached the north bank of the Republican, 10 miles west of Culbertson, on the present site of Trenton. At this point, three white men found them to report "that a large band of Sioux had been camped 25 miles northwest for several days waiting for an opportunity to attack the Pawnees." ²³¹

According to Paul Riley, who extensively researched the Pawnee-Sioux battle, this was where John Williamson failed as trail agent.

In a conflict between boyish egotism and his empowered duties, egotism won. His letters of instruction . . . had been clear. If the possibilities of trouble with other Indians arose, Williamson had the authority to compel the Pawnee to do as he saw fit. Unfortunately, the young greenhorn cared more about his own masculine image than he did his legal wards. The freedom of the hunt and the buffalo range . . . caused Sky Chief to act rashly, and unfortunately Williamson did not have the maturity to withstand the chiefs harangue. ²³²

Williamson had called the Pawnee chief and his sub-chiefs together and offered them his concerns. Sky Chief declared angrily, "These white men are trying to scare us; they want the buffalo for themselves." When the others agreed, he stated further, "If the Sioux come, my young men can run them off," and the hunt continued.

A band of Cut-off Oglala Sioux warriors under Pawnee Killer were encamped on the Stinking Water Creek in what is now Chase County and totaled approximately three hundred.

With them were the Brule Sioux numbering about seven hundred. "On the morning of August 3, six Oglala warriors returned to the Cut-off camp and reported they had come across the Pawnee, about whose presence . . . they had no knowledge." The combined force, now numbering over one thousand warriors, started down the Frenchman valley to meet them in another valley that would afterward be known as Massacre Canyon.²³³

On the morning of August 5th, the Pawnee hunting party moved downstream two miles and turned north up the divide separating the Republican and Frenchman valleys. It was here they fell into the trap set by the Sioux. After sighting buffalo a short distance away the men scattered for the hunt, leaving the women and children unattended as the Sioux attacked.

I noticed a commotion at the head of the procession, which had suddenly stopped. I started to ride up where three of the chiefs were talking, when a boy of sixteen rode up and stopped me. Dismounting, he tied a strip of red flannel to the bridle of my horse, and after remounting told men that the Sioux were coming. What significance was attached to the red flannel on the bridle I was never able to learn.²³⁴

Seeing what was happening, Williamson sought a truce with the Sioux, but they ignored his white flag. When he saw the futility of this move, turned to escape only to have his horse shot out from under him as he reached safety.

By the time a retreat was called, the women and children had run to the safety of the walled canyon, "and the packs of robes, meat, and equipment [which they'd accumulated] were cut from the horses."

